New Buildings in Old Settings – Conservation and Development in the City

Introduction
The form and character of a city is as a consequence of the interplay of a number of factors having different degrees of importance at different times in its history. Growth and change, and occasionally decline, are characteristics of urban revolution, additions and alterations of the urban structure generally following most up to date building methods and architectural styles available to developers.

Design in historic towns is a wide ranging subject, covering, at one extreme, the design of small details such as shop signs, shop fronts, street furniture and paving, and at the other extreme, the design of large scale redevelopment projects covering several acres of land. The renewal and refurbishment of historic areas should be a gradual, piecemeal and continuing process if this can possibly be achieved, simply because the nature of large scale comprehensive development will almost inevitably destroy much of the built fabric.

The arrogance which is so often a personality trait of creative designers may lead them to produce buildings, which are deliberately at odds with the local – surroundings on the basis that it is necessary to make an architectural “statement”, which reflects the society and technology of the 1990’s. Whilst it may sometimes be appropriate for a new building to be strident and deliberately contrast with its neighbours, visual good manners and a critical understanding of the value of conformity are likely to produce a more acceptable and enduring solution.

In attempting to formulate an appropriate design response to particular environment, this paper examines the issues and implications involved on how new buildings may be accommodated into old environments.

New Buildings in Old Settings. Issues
A lack of faith in “modern” architecture is now almost universal, not only in the minds of the general public but more importantly in the minds of Planning Officers and Planning Committee Members who formulate decisions on these matters through the process of Development Control.

The reasons for the lack of confidence in architects and town planners are well known: the wholesale destruction of historic towns and familiar landmarks during the wave of comprehensive development of the 1960’s and 1970’s; the introduction of “inhuman” forms of building such as high-rise blocks; the increased use of “alien” materials and unreliable technology; the philosophy of architectural arrogance, and the exclusion of ornament on ideological grounds. There are countless examples of developments which give evidence of a decline in design standards. The development of the “Salmon-Leap” apartments, which face across the historic bridge to the city walls of Chester, illustrates a total disregard for the character of their setting by employing a rigid and geometric concrete “egg-box” construction with flat roofs and horizontal strip windows, in contrast to the adjoining traditional red brick and stone structures. This development would be less disastrous if contained within the confines of a narrow street, but its open situation on the banks of the River Dee, where it is fully visible from the elevated city walls, emphasises its uncompromising character.
Új épületek történeti környezetben
– városi védelem és fejlesztés

Azok a kérdések, amelyek egy adott város épületeinek a módosítása illetve helyettesítése felvetnek, majdham egyébként magával a várossal, és a siker attól a képességtől függ, hogy a múlt megőrzése és a természetes igény a növekedésre és változásra kibékühető legyen. Egy város változásai, az egymás mellett álló régi és új épületekkel, egyfelől a város múltjának történetét, másfelől pedig a jelen civilizációs szintjét jelenti.

Ahhoz, hogy megpróbáljuk megtalálni a megfelelő tervezési választ egy adott környezet esetére, jelen dolgozat célja, hogy megvizsgálja azokat a kérdéseket és következményeket, amelyek egy új épület történeti környezetbe való helyezésékor találkozunk. Jelen tanulmány megfogalmaz egy sor kritériumot, amelyeket fel lehet használni a különböző jelenségek és szempontok meghatározására és leírására, akkor amikor egy új épületet történeti környezetbe kell olvasztanunk, és ez képezhetik az illeszkedés vizsgálatának alapját. A kritériumok hét egymással összefüggésben levő elemeit tartalmaz: egy történeti terület textúrája, tőmeg és telekkiosztás, beépítési vonal, színes vagy parkányvonat, szín, lépték és vizuális sűrűség.

The declaration of Comprehensive Development Areas in many cities in post-war Britain led to an epidemic of city and town centre destruction and to redevelopment on an unprecedented scale. Historic street patterns were swept away and the small scale, varied and complex townscapes which had evolved over centuries were replaced with new types of building, such as multi-storey car parks built over large retail units with a bland, monotonous and alien appearance. Examples of such insensitive developments can be found, for example, throughout the centres of Leeds and Manchester, where a new Arnadale Centre was dubbed “the largest lavatory wall in Europe”.

There is now an increasing interest in the techniques of sympathetic design of new buildings in historic towns, and there is evidence of a gradual improvement in standards as traditional skills are re-learnt and the importance of well-mannered design is recognised. There is, however, a general reluctance on the part of planning authorities to encourage innovation and experiment – no one wants to repeat the mistakes of the past – and there is a widespread preference for safe “period” styles such as “neo-Georgian” and “neo-vernacular”. There is considerable public pressure in support of this approach and the Prince of Wales has also expressed his liking for the reproduction of historic styles in recent developments at Farnham in Surrey and on the riverside at Richmond. But however competently these imitations, are designed, detailed and constructed they will tend to dilute the value of authentic historic buildings. We must recognise that projects such as these at Richmond and Farnham are exceptional because of the high quality of their execution, but...
for each of these schemes there are hundreds of new buildings being erected each year in our historic towns and cities, which can only be described as ill-conceived pastiche, displaying little or no understanding of traditional form, proportion or detail. In many historic areas, the pressure from Planning Officers and Civic Societies for ‘period’ design is such that developers and architects may be inclined to accept these constraints, rather than risk costly delays or the refusal of their planning applications, which might result from the adoption of a more adventurous approach.

Another consequence of the determination to maintain a superficial impression of visual continuity and “traditional” character in historic areas (even if this depends on pastiche) is that the trend involving redevelopment behind existing historic facades is now well established, and this is often condoned by planning authorities. Such is the public pressure to retain existing landmarks, and such are the distrust of novel forms of architectural expression, that even the most modest and unworthy facades are now being retained in the interests of conservation. This is clearly a negative process which destroys the integrity of individual buildings, and in treating historic towns purely as a series of facades which define the edges of streets and other spaces, seriously undermines the philosophy upon which the conservation of our historic buildings, towns and areas is founded. We are in danger of turning our historic areas into Disneyland by encouraging the redevelopment of historic buildings behind salvaged “historic” facades, and by the creation of new buildings, which because of our lack of conviction and confidence, are clad in historic costume. What is required is an approach to the design of new buildings in historic areas, which achieves a balance between the healthy desire to experiment and innovate, insofar as this reflects the requirements of the brief, and a display of good visual manners, appropriate to the context.

It is important to recognise that in Great Britain, only a small proportion of new buildings in sensitive settings are designed by architects, perhaps as little as 25% to 30%. This proportion would naturally tend to be higher in important town and city centres and for large or complex projects, but in relation to the “ordinary” conservation area, and there are now over 6,000 of those in Britain, we can assume that the majority of proposals for new development will be submitted by surveyors, technicians, or building contractors with little experience or qualification in design. The level of debate on aesthetics or design philosophy in these circumstances is likely to be extremely limited and the gulf between the expectations which may be appropriate for a particular site, and the quality of proposals which are submitted can be very wide indeed. It is perhaps even more disturbing that some schemes which are prepared by qualified architects are no more visually literate or convincing than those submitted by so-called “unqualified” designers. This is a fundamental issue which must be addressed by the architectural and town planning professions and by our specialist educational establishments. Many schools of architecture and town planning in Great Britain devote little time to the study of the history of architecture, or to historic building conservation, or to the development of the skills which are required for work in historic towns and cities. Planning officers who have responsibility for achieving his/her standards of design in historic areas often have no formal design education.

It must also be remembered that all major development proposals are subject to the vagaries of town planning process and that a fundamental part of this system is the debate which takes place in planning committees. In Great Britain, planning officers are given little authority to make decisions on particular proposals, and must make recommendations to a committee of local councillors who are elected on the basis of their broad social or political objectives. Few councillors who sit on planning committees are well versed in the philosophy of design, in conservation issues or architectural aesthetics but this does not prevent them from believing that they are experts in this field. They know what they like, and are frequently willing to overrule the advice of their qualified advisors, relying instead upon personal preference. Committees are often reluctant to concede that design is as important an issue as, for example, land use, or car parking standards, and it can be difficult to demonstrate that objective criteria exist, which provide a framework against which the quality of individual proposals lash can be measured.

In a climate which is increasingly hostile to detailed planning controls, and increasingly supportive to the belief that the private sector – whether entrepreneur, developer or architect – know best those professionals who are charged with the responsibility for controlling standards of design in historic areas, need to be increasingly careful that their philosophical base is sound and that they are not merely imposing personal and subjective views on the creations of others. This phenomenon is unfortunately very common is many of our historic cities, towns and villages. In attempting to formulate an appropriate design response to a particular environment, the designer must first evaluate and understand the character of the place in which he intends to build. The planning officer who will be expected to deal with development proposals most also undertake the same analysis if a worthwhile dialogue on design issues is to take place. There is no doubt that gifted architects or designers may be able to create admirable new buildings without the need for a structured or formalised analysis of the character of a town or area, by relying mainly on intuition and instinct. However, there can be no substitute for a thorough and meticulous evaluation of the social, historic and visual character of a place – before the creative process of design begins –; it is of secondary importance whether this process is intuitive and unstructured, or whether it follows a stricter methodology.

It can be helpful to try to develop a range of criteria, which can be used to define and describe the various aspects which make up the character of an historic area as this can provide the basis for analysis and for discussion about the merits of specific proposals. The following criteria are not intended to be exhaustive but can provide a useful reference both for the designer and for the architect or town planner who is employed in the field of development control.
The issues to be considered are: grain, mass/plot width, building line, skyline/silhouette, colour/texture, scale and visual density.

**Grain**

Grain is a term which is used to describe the “texture” of an area of historic urban fabric. The term is used in the same way as if describing a sculpture, painting or a piece of natural material. A useful concept is to imagine a town or city in miniature so that our hands can be run over it. This would give the impression of the underlying topography and the direction of the flow of buildings and spaces in relation to the land contours. The disposition of open spaces within the built-up fabric would be identified as well as the incidence of unusual features such as towers or domes. The grain of towns can be extremely dense with narrow streets and minimal open space or it may have a loose or coarse texture with a significant proportion of open space in relation to built-up areas.

The grain can be smooth and simply echo the topography or it can be “spiky and assertive. The grain of a large town or city may vary from area to area reflecting the differing land uses and values in suburban areas, industrial zones, and high-density commercial areas. As the grain or texture of an historic area provides a direct tactile message about topography, plan form and land use, and also indicates the average scale of the individual building units which make up the fabric of an area, it can provide a useful “bird’s-eye” perspective on the likely impact of proposed new development.

Most towns and cities have a relatively uniform grain, which provides the backcloth for the exceptional monuments and other public buildings such as cathedrals, churches, castles and town halls which are an essential expression of the religious, political and commercial character of a place and greatly enrich its visual quality. However, the balance between the underlying grain of an area and its exceptional public buildings, which provide historical meaning, visual focus and articulation, can be easily disrupted by the introduction of tall or large-scale new buildings which are given undue prominence. Designers may be deliberately tempted to interrupt the grain of an area simply in order to make an architectural statement, or they may be compelled by the requirements of an unrealistic development brief, which is inevitably destructive. Multi-storey office blocks and car parks, and large open-plan retail spaces are the most prevalent examples of building types which are impossible to assimilate into historic areas with significant damage. These building types can be banned from our historic areas by means of strict planning controls, but this can be at the risk of strangling the essential commercial viability of these areas. The grain of area can be compromised by the introduction of individual buildings which, in their massing and form, pay little regard to the character of their surroundings.

The characteristic grain of a particular town can also be seriously damaged by piecemeal change over a period of time, leading to incremental destruction. The demolition of buildings
behind the principal street frontages, which often takes place in order to provide rear access and car parking, can have a devastating effect over a period of years. This process will eventually create an environment which is made up of buildings lining the streets and thoroughfares but lacks depth, because nothing remains of the complex of older service buildings, workshops, dwellings, stables and gardens which once supported the more prominent street frontages. Because of the passion for designating Comprehensive Development Areas in Britain during the post war years, hundreds of acres of historic city centres have been laid waste, and in some cases are still awaiting redevelopment because of the uncertainties which are inherent in the development industry.

Mass/Plot Width
The perceived mass of a new building is related very closely to the apparent width of the building plot which is expressed clearly on every street frontage in the junctions between adjoining buildings. The size and disposition of these building plots normally derives directly from the early origins of the town or city. Boundaries between plots will usually survive piecemeal rebuilding over several centuries until they are overwhelmed by large-scale development. The width of a typical plot at the street frontage varies within narrow margins almost regardless of the age or architectural flavour of the street, and these frontage widths are surprisingly uniform in towns and cities in many parts of the world. The expression of plot boundaries generates a characteristic vertical emphasis on the street facade, whatever the toxin of architectural treatment. This vertical emphasis permeates the street scene, often in quite subtle ways, and it is the failure to understand the importance of such underlying rhythms in our historic towns, which has led to widespread architectural disasters in recent decades.

These important vertical rhythms can easily be damaged by relatively minor changes, such as the continuation of shop fronts and fascias across a number of adjoining properties, which is often a consequence of the expansion of retail or commercial premises. These superficial changes can be controlled through the development control process, but considerable skill is required to maintain the visual integrity of individual building frontages, whilst at the same time giving expression to building uses which have outgrown the boundaries of the historic building plot.

New developments on a large scale are clearly extremely damaging to the historic fabric of urban areas, and if they cannot be avoided then the street facades can be modelled and manipulated so as to recreate an appropriate vertical visual rhythm which is characteristic of the place. These elevation signals will obviously no longer directly reflect a traditional small-scale pattern of development within historic plots, but this approach is nevertheless justified in the interests of maintaining a cohesive street scene.

Building Line
Building line defines the relationship of the facade of a building to that of its neighbours. In many historic urban areas, the building line is fairly regular and continuous, reflecting the pressure on builders to capitalise on available land. Only buildings of particular significance, such as churches, large houses and town halls were given prominence by breaking the facade back or forward from the regular building line. These incidents in an otherwise regular street frontage add visual interest and spatial complexity, and because they attract the eye, need to be designed with particular care.

Highway improvement lines which were imposed by many highway authorities in Britain during the late 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s illustrate the damaging visual effects which can occur when arbitrary set-backs are imposed on the building line leaving raw and exposed gable ends. The imposition of sight-lines at highway junctions, or at entrances to car parks and service bays can also have the effect of loosening an otherwise rigid and uniform building frontage. The conflict between the demands of highway safety and visually satisfactory townscape seem to be irreconcilable.

The designer is sometimes tempted to give his building special prominence by artificially projecting or setting back the building frontage, without recognising the additional responsibility which this creates. The expectations of the observer will be significantly heightened and the attention which has been focused on the building must be justified by ample visual rewards.

Skyline/Silhouette
The skyline or silhouette of a building is an important characteristic and it is essential that a satisfactory relationship is developed between the line of the eaves, parapet, gable or ridge of a new building and that of adjoining buildings. In some streets the horizontal eaves or parapet line is entirely regular and consistent, and it would be ill mannered to introduce a pitched gable form into this context. The assertive shapes of pitched gables may dominate historic streets, whilst some cities, such as Chester or York, contain a complex mixture of pitched gables and parapets, which are further enriched by the addition of dormer windows and chimneys. The designer must understand the character of the street scene within which he is working, and provide an appropriate response, which maintains the harmony generated by a particular group of buildings rather than introducing discord. It will rarely be necessary to follow through exactly the lines of window sills, string courses, parapets or ridges, except in an extremely formal composition, as the traditional street scene is often visually satisfying precisely because of the visual inconsistencies which it contains.

Difficulties can occur in the design of new buildings because of the absence of chimneys and other features which break the skyline, giving the effect of a denuded roof-scape. Whilst the introduction of fake chimneys which serve no functional purpose cannot be advocated, the imaginative designer may be able to create functional roof features, such as vents for heating
or air-conditioning systems, which can provide visual interest to an otherwise bland skyline.

**Colour/Texture**

If the colour of a new building harmonies closely with that of its neighbours, then many shortcomings of proportion or detailed design will be overlooked by the casual passer-by. Buildings which are assertive in their colouring will naturally draw attention to themselves and will encourage closer scrutiny. The deliberate use of contrasting colour in order to signal the presence of an important public building can obviously be justified, but the deliberate use of contrast in order to satisfy a craving for innovation, or the client’s desire to make a commercial statement are hardly sufficient justification for creating discord within an historic environment. In many situations, the sensitive use of colour may be more relevant than an insistence on finding an exact match to the existing materials of adjoining buildings.

The use of modern synthetic materials, such as patent glazing or stainless steel inevitably creates sharp contrasts with the natural materials from which our historic towns and cities are constructed. There must clearly be a place for the continuous evolution of new structural forms, constructional techniques and materials, but their use in sensitive historic settings must be restrained. The cliché of the simple mirror-glazed façade, which wittily reflects the details of historic buildings which surround it, is now becoming rather overworked and is unlikely to be an enduring solution to the design of buildings in older areas.

When used in a thoughtful way, synthetic materials can add to the sparkle and richness of a visually complex environment, but the designer must be sufficiently competent to handle the potentially damaging visual conflicts which can arise.

**Scale**

In this context, the term “scale” is intended to define the expectation which a particular building generates about the size of the human frame. This impression is created by the size and disposition of elements such as doors, windows, piers and other elements of the façade, and is also closely associated with the subconscious impression which people have about the normal size of building features such as bricks, window panes and so on.

The effective manipulation of scale is a vital aspect of the successful design of new buildings in historic towns and is a skill which is all too rarely encountered. The scale of a building can be deliberately enlarged or reduced by the manipulation of elevation features in order to respond to the character of a particular setting. A much deeper understanding of this fundamental aspect of urban design is needed, and more attention should be devoted to this matter in the training of architects and town planners. As well as helping to evolve a higher degree of skill in this area, this would also enable more meaningful discussion to take place on the scale problems relating to specific proposals – this subject is usually considered to be too esoteric for the day-to-day world of planning applications and development control.
Visual Density

Historic buildings and towns tend to be visually complex and make constant subconscious demands on eye and brain. We have been brainwashed for centuries to anticipate and respond to a complex visual environment, and there is evidence to suggest that such visual complexity is good for our psychological well-being. Recent research on the primitive “limbic brain” which is located in the neo-cortex demonstrates that we have a subconscious appetite for the vulgar and exotic, for rich colour, complexity and powerful rhythms. The limbic brain operates at a subconscious level and has an independent processing system for visual information, which will reach rapid conclusions about a particular visual scenario before our conscious logical brain has had time to complete its analysis. The message is clear – the needs of the limbic brain need to be understood and satisfied if the design of new building is to be sufficiently rewarding. We are beginning to understand the importance of visual richness, and ornament is once more becoming accepted by the architectural and planning professions after being banned for decades on ideological grounds. Whilst there is now considerable confusion as to what form of ornament is appropriate, and whether the reuse of traditional elements is acceptable, the underlying trend towards a return to visual complexity is a significant turning point in the development of urban design.

Conclusion

This paper made the assumption that we are dealing with historic urban areas which have retained a significant proportion of their valuable older buildings, and considers the issues which need to be addressed in introducing single buildings or larger multi-use developments into an existing context. To achieve any degree of success in these matters it is clear that an effective system of land use and strategic planning should exist as a framework within which conservation and design policies can be implemented. There is little value in entering into debate on design issues in relation to a specific site if progress can subsequently be undermined by weak or unsympathetic policies at the broader strategic level.

A further prerequisite of successful design in historic areas is the existence of an effective system of development control, which can prevent unacceptable proposals from taking place, and can provide the vehicle for debate on design matters. Architects and town planners must develop a thorough understanding of the historical, visual and social background of the area within which they propose to develop, otherwise new buildings will be superficial and lacking in conviction and relevance. Few architects and designers pay sufficient attention to the development of this understanding, and town planners are often insufficiently trained or equipped to contribute fully.
Analysis of virtually any traditional street scene illustrates the fact that a certain number of historic buildings will fail to conform to the general character of their surroundings. The result is a varied and exciting townscape which is characteristic of most of our historic towns we find so visually stimulating and enriching. How should the designer decide whether to make his new building conform to the personality of the neighbourhood, or whether a complete contrast is appropriate? Many designers feel that they have an absolute right to make their own contemporary contribution to the continuous historic evolution of town by introducing features which are often discordant, rather than by adopting a less confrontational approach, and “blending in”. This is one of the most subjective aspects of urban design, but one theme emerges clearly: breaking the rules successfully involves considerable skill, whereas good manners are relatively easy to learn.

References: